**Teaching Religious Core Texts in a Secular College: St. Augustine in Conversation with Ancients and Moderns**

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Though founded by Georgia Presbyterians in the 1830s, Oglethorpe University has since its refounding in Atlanta in 1913 been religiously unaffiliated. In the past two decades, its once regionally distinctive (and hence largely Protestant) student body and faculty have mirrored national trends in their increasing “secularity.” Faculty and student struggles with St. Augustine’s *Confessions* led to that text recently being dropped from our “core canon,” despite its importance as an early and pathbreaking “narrative of a self” (the title of the core course from which it was dropped).

As teachers, we cannot presuppose or appeal to any sort of common faith, or even a basic religious understanding, on the part of our students. Those who profess to be Christian seem largely to display the characteristics described by Notre Dame sociologist Christian Smith—“moralistic therapeutic deism.” They may believe that Jesus loves them, but have only the foggiest knowledge of either Roman Catholic or Protestant theology or eccelesiology. We also have a number of immigrant students from Muslim and Hindu traditions.

One approach to dealing with this combination of secularity and religious diversity is seek a kind of religious and ethnic “representation,” at least of non-western (and also non-white) texts, where difference is affirmed and not really deeply contemplated or explored. I leave aside the numerous and well-canvassed problems with this approach and focus only on this: it presumes a core identity which many of the students share. Given our present-oriented and media-driven culture, in which students read neither widely nor deeply, it is probably a mistake to assume that they have a solid understanding even of a Western or Christian heritage. For them, virtually any old book is “alien” or “other,” a source, in other words, of diversity, of a potentially eye-opening challenge to what they think.

Thus I take a different approach in the first semester of our sophomore core sequence, “Human Nature and the Social Order.” Stated colloquially, I tell them that we are going to meet people they cannot meet at the mall or on Facebook, Pinterest, Twitter, or Instagram. In that course, the canonical texts are Aristotle’s *Politics* and *Nicomachean Ethics*, Locke’s *Second Treatise*, and St. Thomas Aquinas’ *Treatise on Law*. For reasons that will soon be obvious, I add selections from St. Augustine’s *City of God* and Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan.*

One of the contrasts I draw in the course is between Aristotle’s conception of “greatness of soul” (*megalopsychia*), which stands at the peak of moral virtue, and the critiques of pride offered by both St. Augustine and Hobbes. As Aristotle explicated this aristocratic understanding, a completely virtuous human being will exhibit a proper attitude toward the justifiable pride he feels for his virtue. (I use the masculine pronouns because Aristotelian virtue is, in the first instance, emphatically the virtue of the male citizen.)

He…who deems himself worthy of great things and *is* worthy of them is held to be great souled…. (N.E., 1123b2-3)

The great-souled man…is an extreme in terms of greatness, but he is in the middle in terms of acting as one ought, since he deems himself worthy of what accords with his worth…. If…he deems himself worthy of great things, while being worthy of them, and especially of the greatest things, he would be concerned with one matter most of all…. Honor is such a thing, since it is indeed the greatest of the external goods. (N.E., 1123b13-21)

The great-souled man, if indeed he is worthy of the greatest things, would be the best, for he who is better is always worthy of what is greater, and he who is best is worthy of the greatest things. He who is truly great-souled…must be good, and what is great in each virtue would seem to belong to the great-souled man. (N.E., 1123b27-30)

Virtue, according to Aristotle, is an end in itself. The person who has attained complete virtue, who embodies all the virtues in their fullness, would seem to be worthy of the greatest honor as having attained that final end. Everyone should look up to him, and aspire to emulate him, to the degree that it is possible for them to do so. Assuming that self-knowledge is a component of virtue, the completely virtuous person would recognize himself as such, and would understand his relationship with his fellows: he fully deserves the honor that they are obliged to give him. There is a difference in rank between himself and his fellows, and both sides ought to recognize it: “the great-souled man justly looks down on others” (N.E., 1124b6). To be sure, the completely virtuous person is more likely to recognize and properly to appreciate this difference in rank than are his less virtuous fellows. He may have to be content with recognizing that he deserves the highest honor (which, in any event, is no big thing for him), rather than actually receiving it. It is no surprise, then, that “the great-souled are held to be haughty” (N.E., 1124a20).

Many students find this virtue hard to conceive, not to say off-putting. It is easy for them to agree with Thomas Hobbes’s “natural law” injunction against pride, which, he says, largely exists in the mind of the beholder and all too frequently causes the kind of conflict that the Leviathan –“the king of the proud”--is designed to avoid. Instinctively egalitarian and having drunk a certain kind of democratic or vaguely Christian humility with their mother’s milk, as it were, my students are almost relieved to see that there is an intellectually respectable basis for their aversion to the pride of Aristotle’s great-souled man.

Here is how Hobbes puts it in *Leviathan*:

The question ‘who is the better man?’ has no place in the condition of mere nature, where…all men are equal. The inequality that now is, has been introduced by the laws civil. I know that *Aristotle* (in the first book of his Politics, for a foundation of his doctrine) maketh men by nature, some more worthy to command (meaning the wiser sort, such as he thought himself to be for his philosophy), others to serve (meaning those that had strong bodies, but were not philosophers as he), as if master and servant were not introduced by consent of men, but by difference of wit; which is not only against reason, but also against experience. For there are very few so foolish that had not rather govern themselves than be governed by others, nor when the wise in their own conceit contend by force with them who distrust their own wisdom, do they always, or often, or almost at any time, get the victory. If nature therefore have made men equal, that equality is to be acknowledged; or if nature have made men unequal, yet because men that think themselves equal will not enter into conditions of peace but upon terms of equality, such equality is to be admitted. (Lev, XV.21)

It is worth pausing to note here that Aristotle’s inegalitarianism in the *Ethics* has to do with virtue and the honor due to virtuous men, whereas Hobbes’s critique of this inegalitarianism focuses almost entirely on its alleged political consequences. That this inequality *might* have political consequences, I do not think Aristotle denies. Where there is a disproportion between one person’s extraordinary virtue and the substantially lesser capacities of his fellow citizens, Aristotle says that the city faces two choices: either submit to being ruled by the extraordinarily virtuous (great-souled) man or ostracize him. But there are at least two other considerations worth taking into account here. First, Aristotle argues more than once that politics works best when citizens rule and are ruled in turn, which presumes a certain proportionality, if not equality, among the citizens. Great inequality of talent—or of any other politically relevant attribute—imperils healthy political life. Second, it is not clear that the great-souled man actually has all that much interest in ordinary political life. Aristotle thrice says “nothing is great to him” (N.E., 1123b32, 1125a2, 1125a16), and indicates that “he is idle and a procrastinator” and “is disposed to act in few affairs, namely, in great and notable ones” (N.E., 1124b24, 25). Furthermore, whereas Aristotle explicitly distinguishes between political rule and the rule of a master over slaves, Hobbes seems to elide this distinction: any time a person claims to rule another without his or her consent, the relationship is in effect that of master over slave.

Hobbes’s insistence on this last point follows directly from his claim that all human beings are by nature equal, at the very least in the sense that they are equally vulnerable, but also in the sense that each person is the best judge of what is good for himself or herself: “A plain husbandman is more prudent in affairs of his own house than a privy councilor in the affairs of another man” (Lev., VIII.11). No one knows better than the individual what is good for himself or herself, in large measure because, for Hobbes, “good” is relative to the contingent constitution of a person’s appetites. Thus Hobbes’s egalitarianism follows from the assertion that there is no highest good discernible by human reason (which itself is simply instrumental, a servant of human appetites). At best there is a *summum malum*, a worst evil, on which (for all practical purposes) human beings can agree: almost no one wishes to die violently and hence be utterly unable to fulfill any desires. This of course amounts to a rejection of the claim—harbored by those who take honor seriously—that there are some lives or ways of life that are not worth living, that death ought to come before dishonor (see, for example, N.E., 1124b8-10).

There are of course people who emphatically do not regard violent death as the greatest evil, and hence pose a problem for Hobbes’s peaceful political order. Hobbes hopes to marginalize them as troublemakers and to inoculate the rest of his audience against their appeal, The power of the Leviathan is intended to humble those who can be humbled and to give the holdouts exactly what they seem to want—a swift, sure violent death that will prevent them from continuing to disturb the peace. As Hobbes makes clear in his discussions of the meaning of science and philosophy, the touchstone of the “truth” of his position is its practical success (see Lev., V.17, XLVI.1). It is not so much the quality of his argument that matters as it is its effectiveness in producing the desired result. More precisely, its effectiveness in producing the result is the measure of its quality.

I have never been altogether persuaded by this argument, regardless of its promise of practical success. Leaving aside that it arguably fails on its own terms, as “proud” disturbers of the peace remain a perennial and all too often successful challenge, it suffers from a number of theoretical problems. First, it relativizes the good in a way that is not obviously consistent with human experience. While it is true that whether we like our martinis shaken or stirred is a matter of personal preference, it is much less clear that all human goods are purely personal. Indeed, Hobbes more or less concedes as much when he recurs to a *summum malum* that presumes that life at any price is a good for everyone. Second, it cheapens or instrumentalizes our sense of honor (see, for example, Lev., X.16). That even Hobbes cannot consistently live with the consequences of this position is clear from his affirmation of the importance of promise-keeping. While he asserts that it is *always* in our interest to keep promises—a position that is controverted easily enough—he also relies upon a kind of pride in intellectual integrity to ground this position (see Lev., XIV.7), even as he admits that it is rare (Lev., XIV.31). Finally, Hobbes’s call for our commitment to equality demands—if only as a fallback position—that we be hypocrites: “if nature have made men unequal, yet because men that think themselves equal will not enter into conditions of peace but upon terms of equality, such equality is to be admitted” (Lev., XV.21). Whether our belief in our own superiority is well-grounded (as it would be in the case of Aristotle’s great-souled man) or based on vanity, Hobbes demands for the sake of peaceful coexistence that we conceal our views. If need be, his peace is based on a lie that obscures the truth about ourselves.

From this consideration of Hobbes’s critique of Aristotelian pride, it is appropriate to turn to an earlier critique offered by St. Augustine. Like Hobbes, St. Augustine thematizes the problem of pride. While Hobbes’s Leviathan is the king of the proud, providing an earthly answer to the challenge posed by human vanity, St. Augustine begins *The City of God* by criticizing the city of man—that is, the Leviathan and all its counterparts—as being “dominated by the lust to dominate” (CoG, I.pr). That is, from St. Augustine’s perspective, the very human Hobbesian attempt to deal with pride is itself infected by it. Rather than solving the problem, Hobbes merely displaces it. However much Hobbes’s political mechanisms can control those whom it governs (and I have suggested that it does so imperfectly and problematically), it leaves intact the pride of the sovereign and thus leaves intact a very influential symbol of (and hence exhortation to) pride. A purely human solution to the problem of pride is premised on the very passion it means to address. While it is possible to recognize the cleverness of using a passion against itself—letting ambition counteract ambition, for example—the deeper problem remains.

For St. Augustine, the first sin, and hence all sin, has its roots in pride:

The first sin subjected human nature to a corruption we see and feel, and thus to death also. Human nature was perturbed and tossed about by many and contrary emotions to which it was not subject in paradise before the fall, even though it existed in an animal body…

The first human beings, having become evil in secret, openly fell into disobedience. After all, the evil work would not have been done unless an evil will preceded it. Further, how can the will begin to be evil except through pride? Thus, “The beginning of all sin is pride”…. What, though, is pride but the longing for wrongful exaltation? This exalting is wrong when the mind deserts the principle to which it ought to cling and becomes, as it were, its own principle. (CoG, XIV.12, 13)

Sin is not rooted in the conflict between soul and body, or reason and passion. Rather, it comes from the will, from the principle of putting oneself first, of thinking for oneself by oneself, instead of submitting humbly and obeying God’s will.

St. Augustine also makes it clear that there is no merely human solution to the problem of pride. Any purely human attempt here and now to attain happiness (which he agrees with Aristotle is the highest good) amounts to an “astonishing vanity” (CoG, XIX.4). Virtue, whether defined in intellectual or moral terms, requires God’s grace. And genuine happiness cannot be attained in this world, but only in the next. Everything in this world is marked by sin and decay. The perfection and incorruptibility sought by Aristotle and the other ancients can only be found in the next world, in the City of God.

Like Hobbes, in other words, Augustine agrees that the honor sought by the great-souled man is a kind of vainglory. But his response to this phenomenon is somewhat more complex. Consider, for example, his measured appreciation of the Roman pursuit of honor:

They scorned their own private goods for the sake of the common good…. They resisted avarice. They concerned themselves with their country’s affairs through their generous advice. Crimes and vices were punished according to their laws. Through these qualities they sought, as if by a true path, honor, power, and glory. They were honored among nearly all peoples; they imposed the laws of their empire on many peoples; and today they are glorified by the literature and history of almost all peoples. They have no reason to complain about the justice of the supreme and true God. “They have received their reward.” (CoG, V.15)

Rather than reject the classical view of politics root and branch, Augustine gives it what he regards as its due. This pursuit of glory does not simply lead to conflict and suffering, but produces flawed, all-too-human goods. The *pax Romana* is only an image of the genuine peace available to Christians in the city of God, but if we come to recognize its flaws (see CoG, XV.4, for example), it can teach us both the limitations of our abilities and the real goal for which we ought to strive. Rather than construct an alternative to a problematical human passion, as does Hobbes, Augustine shows how our earthly strivings contain a glimmer of truth pointing us in a better direction. Hobbes, on the other hand, would distract us altogether from any “better” direction.

The problem of pride is not simply that it disturbs this earthly peace, but rather that, even when “channeled” productively, it mistakenly assumes that the earthly peace is the only possible peace, one achieved on terms that human power alone can set.

[P]ride imitates God in a distorted way. It hates equality with partners under God, but wants to impose its own domination upon its partners in place of God. Consequently, it hates the just peace of God and loves its own iniquitous peace. (CoG, XIX.12)

Furthermore, human beings in their pride do not recognize the fundamental way in which the earthly peace they enjoy is a gift of God (CoG, XIX.13). Thinking of it as their own accomplishment, it serves largely to feed the pride it is supposed to control. Both Aristotle and Augustine would agree that a life that consists in a “perpetual and restless desire of power after power” (Lev., XI.2) is ultimately meaningless and unsatisfying. Indeed, rather than being capable of satisfaction, even (as Hobbes would have it) provisionally and temporarily, the lust for domination enslaves us (CoG, XIX.15). For St. Augustine, Hobbes’s proffered solution simply perpetuates our enslavement.

Augustine of course does not deny that the fallen human condition requires government. To borrow a phrase from James Madison, because men are not angels, government is necessary. But the goods that government can provide are not the greatest goods, and the work of governing is just that—work, not honor. Because “all is vanity under the sun” (CoG, XIX.19), no one ought to be “seized” by the exercise of political power, regarding it as something humanly satisfying, as opposed to something humanly necessary.

In the end, Augustine poses a fundamental challenge to the “worldliness” of both Aristotle and Hobbes, showing how pride could be said to infect both thinkers’ views. He is clearly a critic of the aristocratic view espoused (however ironically) by Aristotle, but also of the egalitarian alternative posed by Hobbes. For Augustine, pride is not merely a political problem, to be cleverly engineered away, pushed to the margins where it can no longer effectively disturb our peace. Indeed, he would insist that the Hobbesian way of seeking peace cannot succeed on its own terms, and that every political effort to seek peace is better understood as pointing us toward the much more satisfying peace of the city of God. At the same time, Augustine does not go as far in his practical deprecation of ordinary political life as Hobbes does. Where the great Englishman thinks of human sociality as basically an occasion for us to get on one another’s nerves (see Lev., XIII.5), Augustine thinks that every so-called community—which strives for a shared peace and has shared (albeit flawed) loves—can point us toward the true community of the city of God. Where Hobbes would reduce community to reduce conflict, Augustine would have us take a more measured view, recognizing the genuine, albeit limited, goods that we can attain on earth.

As I noted at the outset, I explore these contrasts with my students not to proselytize, but to show how serious thinkers explore different views of the human condition. As exemplified by St. Augustine, the Christian tradition does not simply offer a bland happy face and an unsophisticated claim of faith, but rather a penetrating exploration of a very influential feature of human nature. It is a view that, I think, can productively be put in conversation with others, showing the strengths and weaknesses of all.